

Charlotte Mason: For Whose Sake?

By Aimee R. Natal

There is a growing interest in Charlotte Mason among many private schools and homeschooling families. Not everyone who employs her methodology is necessarily aware of the foundations of her approach. This article is intended to open the dialogue on her educational methodology and her philosophical foundations that undergird it.

In 1984, the daughter of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, Susan Schaeffer Macauley, wrote *For the Children's Sake: Foundations of Education for Home and School*.¹ The book introduces the philosophy of Miss Charlotte Mason, an English educator of the Victorian era.

Mason was an early childhood school teacher, a college teacher in elementary learning methods, and an educational author before she formed what was originally a union for home schooling mothers, the Parents National Education Union (PNEU), in 1891. This union grew to be an association for many Mason-style schools that were established in England. Mason also founded a teaching college and practicing school before her death in 1923. Both the teaching college and many of the PNEU schools remain in England today. Macauley's interest in Mason began after she enrolled her two daughters in a PNEU school in England. In *For the Children's Sake*, Macauley references three volumes of Mason's six-volume work now entitled *The Original Home Schooling Series (1909)*,² which was published in 1989. It is upon a careful and thorough reading of these volumes, that one begins to seriously question the popularity of Mason's philosophy among Christian educators, classical, home schooling, or otherwise.

It is true that the popular ideas associated with Mason are her emphases on what she called 1) "living books," or first-rate literature upon which to base education (as opposed to "twaddle" textbooks and watered down children's versions); 2) the development of good habits in children early on; 3) the implementation of narration, telling or writing back what one has heard or read once and once only; and 4) the importance of unstructured play, time outdoors, and weekly nature walks. In and of themselves, these ideas cause no alarm to the Christian and at the same time are not all exclusively Mason's.

Mason did however, compose 18 fundamental "articles of educational faith" which are exclusively hers, and are listed in the preface of each of her volumes. Macauley also lists them, briefly commenting on only some of them. But it is Mason herself who expounds on them at great length, repeatedly, throughout her writings. Like Macauley says, "I feel I have met someone when I am able to read his own account, not merely what somebody else tells me about him."³ Rather than letting Macauley tell us about Mason, we meet Mason firsthand by considering her own account of some of her "articles of educational faith," and the methods which flow from them, in light of Scripture.

Article One declares: "Children are born persons." True enough; however, there is much more there than meets the eye, as will be seen after discussing Article Two: "They [children] are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and evil." Macauley does not address this second article in her book. In the Christian home schooling community,

¹ Susan Schaeffer Macauley, *For the Children's Sake: Foundations of Education for Home and School* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1984).

² Charlotte M. Mason, *The Original Home Schooling Series: The Classic Reference by the Founder of the Home Schooling Movement* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989).

³ *For the Children's Sake*, p. 108.

authors and speakers on Mason offer the feeble and unfounded explanation that in Mason's day, poor children were seen as born bad, and rich children born good, which Dickens illustrates in his novels. Thus they say Mason is commenting only on social and economic status. Not so. As a matter of fact, when Mason does comment on social status, she says that one born into a family which for generations has been in the "subject" or working class is born with an "incalculable accumulation of vicious inclinations and propensities"⁴ and may have "less predisposition to truthfulness"⁵ than the child born to a family of the "ruling" or educated class. This "doctrine of heredity" to which Mason adheres attributes the traits of devoutness or generosity to strains of character that run in ruling class families. This doctrine further teaches that the only two ways for man to advance or acquire good traits are by marrying into the ruling class or by education⁶. Miss Mason obviously felt called to "advancing the race" by the latter⁷.

So when Article Two says man is born neither good nor bad, Mason is not speaking of class but in general terms about man's spiritual condition at birth. Mason reiterates: "A child is born neither true nor false. He is absolutely without either virtue or vice when he comes into the world. He has tendencies, indeed, but these are no more either virtuous or vicious than is the colour of his eyes."⁸ "The fact seems to be that children are like ourselves...because they have been born so; that is, with tendencies, dispositions, towards good and towards evil."⁹ "[T]he child has no character to speak of, but only natural disposition."¹⁰ "[I]f our Lord pronounces the little child also to be humble, is it not because of the indwelling divinity, the glory in the child, which we call innocence?"¹¹

The Bible clearly dispels this notion of the innocence of man, made popular again in Mason's time by various men, such as Darwin, Rousseau and Goethe, all to whom she refers and quotes throughout her volumes. While Mason does not state outright, "Man is born good," she at the same time does not state, teach or imply that man is born bad, or born in sin, or is naturally sinful. The Bible does.

David says, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5), and that "man goes astray from the womb," and errs from birth (Psalm 58:3). Paul affirms that before we were Christians "we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Ephesians 2:3). He adds that "I know nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh" (Romans 7:18), and, "to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted" (Titus 1:15).

One might agree that theologically Mason is wrong in her refusal to believe in original sin or total depravity. Indeed, she states that "depravity is a disease, a condition which man is capable of recovering from" via formation of good habits and curative treatment (taken from chapter 15 of Volume 2, which includes her discourse of doom about General Booth's then recent social experiment in England, the Salvation Army.) But one might then determine that what really matters are Mason's educational ideas and methods, which seem good in and of themselves, never minding her theology.

⁴ Charlotte M. Mason, Volume 2: Parents and Children (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 155.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 206.

⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 75, 121, 159.

⁸ Ibid., p.206.

⁹ Charlotte M. Mason, Volume 6: A Philosophy of Education (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 46.

¹⁰ Charlotte M. Mason, Volume 1: Home Education (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 139.

¹¹ Volume 2: Parents and Children, p. 282.

One such educational method of Mason's is testing a child's comprehension through narration. After a child reads or listens to hundreds of pages per week, which is what Mason advocates, he then tells or writes back what he has just heard or read. Narration replaces quizzes, tests, drills, worksheets and homework. Mason's confidence in excluding all other methods of testing and using only narration¹² is based on her belief in two things: that a child is born with the power of perfect attention¹² and with a reliable hunger for knowledge. In fact, this is what she means in Article One: "That children are born persons, is the first article of the educational credo which I am concerned to advance; this implies that they come to us with power of attention, and avidity of knowledge."¹³

Relying solely on the child's presumed inborn power of attention and desire of knowledge, Mason teaches against the use of presentations, illustrations, summaries, questioning, object lessons or lectures.¹⁴ Rather, the "chief instrument of education," to her, is this natural hunger for knowledge, which is to be sufficient to secure a child's interest, his "perfect attention, and seemly discipline."¹⁵

Mason muses, "We foresee happy days for children when all teachers know that no other exciting motive whatever is necessary to produce good work in each individual however big a class than that love of knowledge which is natural to every child."¹⁶ Thus, motivators such as grades, exhibitions, scholarships, rewards, praise, and punishment are taboo, equated with encouraging greed and vanity and inducing fear.¹⁷

Mason's ideas about a child's nature make the teacher practically unnecessary, except as the provider of good books, and a listener or reader of narrations. However, if the teacher is the parent, and the child is young and still at home, Mason suddenly makes the parents' role as teachers immensely important, claiming it is they who determine their child's thoughts and actions, which Mason believes to be based all on habit. "Habit, in the hands of the mother, is as his wheel to the potter, his knife to the carver the instrument by means of which she turns out the design she has already conceived in her brain. . . . Habit [is] the means whereby the parent may make almost anything he chooses of his child."¹⁸

The early formation of good habits is another of Mason's more popular key ideas. She states in Article Seven: "By EDUCATION IS A DISCIPLINE, is meant the discipline of habits formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structures to habitual lines of thought i.e., to our habits." It is this second sentence that warrants special attention.

In *The Culture of Character: The Treatment of Defects*, (chapter 13 of Volume 2) and elsewhere, Mason describes the discovery of the physiologists of her day regarding the brain and man's character. Man's character is the result of his habits, which are a result of his thoughts, and his thoughts he has no control over, she says.¹⁹ Thus, a man must encounter good ideas to influence his thoughts, because his thoughts "make an impression upon the nervous substance of the cerebrum."²⁰

¹² Volume 6: A Philosophy of Education, p. 76.

¹³ Ibid., p. 247.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁸ Volume 1: Home Education, p. 97.

¹⁹ Volume 2: Parents and Children, pp. 156-157.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 163.

"All hail to the good news," Mason cries in response to this, "the latest presentation of the theory of evolution." She continues: "[T]he last word of Science . . . is full of hope . . . Today is the day of salvation, physically speaking, because a habit . . . may be begun in a moment, formed in a month, confirmed in three months, become the character, the very man, in a year."²¹

Mason continues, "Ye must be born again, we are told; and we say, with a sense of superior knowledge of the laws of Nature, How can a man be born again? [A]t last, the miracle of conversion is made plain to our dull understanding. We perceive that conversion, however sudden, is no miracle at all. . . [W]e find that every man carries in his physical substance the gospel of perpetual, or always possible renovation; and we find how, from the beginning, Nature was prepared with her response to the demand of Grace. Is conversion possible? we ask; and the answer is, that it is, so to speak, a function of which there is latent provision in our physical constitution, to be called forth by the touch of a potent idea. Truly His commandment is exceeding broad, and grows broader day by day with each new revelation of Science."²²

While Mason's emphasis on the formation of good habits may seem fine on the surface, once it is penetrated, one sees how Mason perceives that even man's conversion, salvation, hinges upon or is the result of his forming good habits based upon good thoughts based upon good ideas. Mason's hope for man's salvation seems to be placed in Science (and Education), with little or no mention of Scripture, leaving one doubting her faith in God's Word.

Mason's teaching reflects belief more in the words of man than a belief in The Word, our Lord Jesus, and the power of His redeeming blood for our salvation. If a man can convert himself, and have his thoughts which "think themselves all day long" be "thoughts of goodness and purity,"²³ there is no need for God, His Son or His blood. Mason's philosophy diminishes our need for a new life, not through our efforts, but through the work of *Christ alone*.

While only three of Mason's "articles of educational faith," and her method of narration and stress on habit formation are discussed here, these are enough (but certainly not all) to leave one at least questioning why a Christian family or school would label themselves as followers of her educational philosophy. Mason's premise is cracked, leaking error into many of her methods and her ideas about children and knowledge. Classical educators may at first be attracted to Mason's advocacy for Great Books and the use of original sources, but to then proceed to buy into her educational methods, usually on the word of another, is folly.

It is folly because Mason's methods approach the child as a neutral entity, born only with some hereditary tendencies towards good or evil, in disregard of the child's sin nature. Scripture teaches we are born in sin, and dead in our sin, and that our nature is not good, but evil.

It is folly because Mason assumes the child is born with a power of attention such that no other motivators are necessary or should be used, such as illustrations, object lessons, grades, rewards or punishments. God shows us in Scripture that man needs motivators, and

²¹ Ibid., pp. 158-159.

²² Volume 2: Parents and Children, p. 161.

²³ Ibid., p. 162.

He employs the use of reward and punishment throughout His dealings with man past, present and future. God also uses illustration and object lessons in His teaching of His people Israel in the Old Testament, and through Jesus Christ's lessons and parables in the New Testament.

It is folly because Mason assumes the child is born with a yearning for what is good, knowledge, and that that desire alone, along with good books, is all the child needs upon which to act, to learn. One has to trust that the child will want to know what is good, and that the child will actually learn what he has read after reading it, hundreds of pages, on his own initiative, week in and week out, with no other incentive or motivation than his own desire.

Scripture teaches that our sin natures cannot be relied on to desire what is good. God knows we often need to defer to authority in knowing what is good for us. He requires us to act in obedience, giving us the incentive of reward or punishment. Further, God saw it necessary to not leave us with just a written book, the Law, but sent the Great Teacher to teach us by example and through questioning and illustration. After studying Charlotte Mason's six volumes, a Christian should conclude that her educational philosophy is not for the children's sake.

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